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AN

ATTEMPT,

TO PROVE THAT THE

NATURE AND ATTRIBUTES

OF THE

DEITY,

CANNOT BE

SUFFICIENTLY DEMONSTRATED

BY

HUMAN REASON,

TO RENDER

REVELATION UNNECESSARY.

BY JOHN JEBB, A. B.

Dublin.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

In Trinity Term, 1797, the following little production was delivered in the Divinity School of Trinity College, and to it was adjudged by the Provoſt and Senior Fellows, the firſt of the prizes left by the late Doctor Downes, for promoting the ſtudy of Divinity. Candidates were required, each to recite without the aſſiſtance of notes, a compoſition on ſome ſubject of Ethics or Divinity, its nature and length to be determined by the Board. The following ſubject was propoſed, and for obvious reaſons, the time of recitation was limited to a quarter of an hour; of conſequence the Treatiſe which is now printed at the requeſt of a few

a few friends, for their uſe, is nothing more than a brief Compendium, as it was neceſſary to compreſs a great quantity of materials, into a very ſmall compaſs.

Trinity College,
June 10th, 1799.

JOHN JEBB.

AN

ATTEMPT,

&c.

THE advantages and neceſſity of revelation have been frequently denied: but as often as new enemies have attacked the bulwark of our faith, ſo often have they been repelled by the reſiſtleſs force of truth. Among the many arguments urged with acuteneſs, and confuted with ability, the ſufficiency of human reaſon to diſcover all truths moral and religious is not the leaſt remarkable; with one branch of this argument we are at preſent concerned,—

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it is the object of this discourse to prove that the nature and attributes of the Deity cannot be sufficiently demonstrated by human reason to render revelation unnecessary.

If we look to the civil or popular religions of antiquity, we shall there find little to direct us in our search after the one true God; in the monstrous polytheism of the Greeks and Romans, in the stupid idolatry of the Egyptians, Persians and Chaldeans, in their sacrifices of human beings, in their prophane ceremonies shocking to the eye of modesty or the ear of virtue, in their worship of evil beings, in the enormities which they attributed to their more benevolent Deities,—in their whole system, we are involved in such a labyrinth of ignorance and folly, that the farther we advance the more we are removed from the knowledge of the one, supreme, all-powerful and just God.

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If, again, we are led to the Pagan myſteries, we ſhall find them promulgated but to a few, inſtituted by thoſe legiſlators who promoted polytheiſm, and holding out deification as an inducement to the practice of the ſocial virtues and civil duties; we ſhall alſo find the initiated profeſſing the religion of the ſtate however monſtrous or abſurd; thus we ſee that the myſteries led not to a knowledge of the true God, and even if they had, we perceive that their influence muſt have been very confined.

Nor does the religion of philoſophy among the ancients afford much light on this important ſubject; little leſs abſurd than the ſyſtems of the lawgivers and poets, it is involved in difficulties and contradictions inexplicable by the wiſeſt; each ſect had its peculiar deities and its peculiar faith, and whether we conſider the creative atoms and liſtleſs Gods of Epicurus; the intelligent Æther, or World, or Sun of the Stoics; or the

univerſal ſcepticiſm of the Pyrrhoniſts and Academicians, we ſhall have little cauſe to venerate the deductions of human reaſon. What ſhall we ſay of that religion which repreſented the Gods as leading a life of total indolence, exerciſing no providence, endued with no power; which gave them the form of man as the moſt perfect form, and wiſhed to avoid the neceſſity of a Creator as of a Tyrant? Such was the religion of the Epicureans. What ſhall we ſay of that religion which worſhipped the creature inſtead of the Creator; which allowed a plurality of Gods diviſible and corruptible; which ſuppoſed that they exerciſed a providence only over great men and on great occaſions; which attributed to them a degree of weak goodneſs inconſiſtent with juſtice; which did away the neceſſity of divine power to puniſh and reward, by affirming the ſufficiency of human virtue to confer perfect happineſs; which denied that any circumſtance could make the virtuous miſerable, yet allowed that circumſtances might juſtify ſuicide;

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and which preached not the fear of the Gods nor the neceſſity of repentance?—Such was the religion of the Stoics. What ſhall we ſay of that religion which doubted the exiſtence of any Gods or if it admitted their exiſtence, confeſſed a total ignorance of their attributes?—Such was the religion of the Sceptics and Academicians; the opinions of other ſects relative to the Deity may be reduced to thoſe already mentioned and therefore need not a particular enumeration.

If, leaving the conſideration of ſects, we look to the moſt eminent and religious ſages of antiquity, we ſhall find them doubtful in their opinions—deriving (by their own confeſſion) their cleareſt notions of the Deity from ancient tradition, that is, from the revelation granted to the Patriarchs and Jews —for the moſt part anxiouſly expecting ſome divine revelation, but all profeſſing a belief in the popular Deities. Thus from their writings and their practice we perceive that their divine knowledge was confined, and

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that their greateſt light flowed not from reaſon: but even ſuppoſing they had arrived at a ſtrict demonſtration of the nature and attributes, we know it was not promulgated, and could have had neither perſpicuity nor authority ſufficient to procure it general belief.

But it may be ſaid that there now exiſt perfect demonſtrations of the nature and attributes; let us then examine the principal offered in later times, and firſt it may be obſerved that the proof *à poſteriori* however level to all capacities and convincing to all honeſt minds, amounts no higher than probability, and experience proves that it has often failed: the contemplation of the works of nature occaſioned the firſt idolatry by leading to the worſhip of the Sun, Moon, and Stars; even thinking men, on account of its harmony and perfection have conſidered the univerſe a God, and the exiſtence of natural and moral evil has made ſome attribute Creation to a Dæmon: how abſurd, then, to ſay that man can find

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out God by the works of Creation and yet not find out that Creation is the work of God. If indeed the conſideration of the works of nature can give an idea of the divine attributes we muſt either aſſert that every improvement in phyſics enlarges our knowledge of the divine perfections, or that the rudeſt and moſt poliſhed nations have the ſame, and that a perfect religion.

Such are the calamities which afflict the virtuous, and ſo frequent is the proſperity of the wicked, that a view of the events of this life would deſtroy the idea of the moral attributes in the mind of a mere rational obſerver,—to eſtabliſh, then, the wiſdom, goodneſs and juſtice of God, a future ſtate of retribution is neceſſary; now, however the conſideration of man either as a phyſical or moral being, may afford us lively hopes of a future ſtate, it does not produce any thing like demonſtration; the only other means which have been

been tried, a conſideration of God himſelf, affords a ſtrong argument for the immortality of the Soul, and an exact diſtribution of rewards and puniſhments; but this argument takes for granted the divine wiſdom, goodneſs and juſtice, the very attributes in queſtion, and to prove which, the certainty of a future ſtate was a *deſideratum*.

Before we conſider the chief arguments which have been offered *à priori*, it may not be improper to remark that ſome attributes which we conſider eſſential (the Unity for inſtance) have been neglected by the heathen philoſophers; and that all chriſtian divines have contended for the ſame attributes, entertaining no ſuch jarring opinions, as the ancients did, of the divine nature: from whence we may conclude that they had a peculiar advantage, knowing from revelation the attributes they were to prove, a caſe exactly ſimilar to that of a mathematician, who is told the

the enunciation of a propoſition and then diſcovers the proof. On no other principle, indeed than the aid of revelation, can we account for modern ſuperiority in deſcribing the divine nature, ſince the ancients at leaſt equalled us in talents and application. But even with this aid reaſon is incompetent to ſuperſede faith.

A demonſtration of the attributes *à priori*, has been, by many thought impoſſible, as nothing can be conceived prior to the firſt cauſe; but an examination of this objection would involve a diſcuſſion too deep for the preſent occaſion; let us then conſider whether the chief demonſtrations offered are concluſive.

Mr. Locke's beſt proof of the Unity, from the coincidence of will and action in all ſelf-exiſtent beings, depends on their infinite perfection; yet he grants that unity is neceſſary to infinite perfection; that is without ſuppoſing unity, infinite

perfection cannot be proved. So that he proves the unity by preſuppoſing it.

Dr. Fiddes does not conſider the unity capable of ſtrict demonſtration, and he attempts to prove the infinite perfection of the Deity from his eternity and illimitability; but infinite duration does not infer infinite extent, and the illimitability of the ſelf-exiſtent being, only proves that he is and has been always the ſame, but does not prove what he is.

Mr. Wollaſton grounds his arguments for the perfection and unity, on the ubiquity of the ſelf-exiſtent being,—which ubiquity he does not prove, ſince the utmoſt his reaſoning amounts to on this point is, that if any perſon were to ſuppoſe the ſelf-exiſtent being out of one place, he might ſuppoſe him out of every place, a poſition which beſides being without proof, is nugatory, and might be uſed to diſprove the exiſtence of any being whatſoever.

Dr.

Dr. Clarke firſt proves a * *modal* neceſſity of exiſtence, and then deduces the attributes from a *cauſal* or antecedent neceſſity; which equivocation however does not ſerve his purpoſe, ſince this antecedent neceſſity muſt have had ſome cauſe to determine its exiſtence, and that cauſe another, till we are involved in a chain of neceſſities; beſides this neceſſity muſt either have been the ſelf-exiſtent being, or ſomething extraneous to it, or one of its attributes, all which ſuppoſitions are equally abſurd; nor is a fair uſe made of the term, ſince it is in an arbitrary manner differently defined in different places, in order to prove the ſeveral attributes.

And Dr. Hamilton ſays, that there cannot *poſſibly* be two unoriginated beings, becauſe we cannot *conceive* any poſſible

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* Vide a Treatiſe, by Dr. Waterland, ap. Law's "enquiry into the ideas of Space, &c."

difference between two eternal and omnipreſent beings, and conſequently they muſt coincide; an argument which ſeems to limit the divine nature within the bounds of our finite capacities and to take for granted that the Deity cannot poſſeſs any attributes unintelligible by us.

Thus it appears that neither the popular nor philoſophic religions of antiquity nor the arguments and demonſtrations of later times give us a ſatisfactory proof of the nature and attributes of the Deity: if however reaſon were our only guide, and if ſhe did point out one uncauſed being, infinite and all-powerful, endued with every perfection natural and moral, the Creator and cauſe of all things;—yet ſtill the exerciſe of reaſon would involve us in the greateſt difficulties: various are the truths in all appearance contradictory to the divine attributes which reaſon may diſcover, and yet never be able to ſolve

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the difficulty ſhe creates. Need I mention the exiſtence of moral evil and phyſical neceſſity, apparently overthrowing the moſt eſſential attributes? Here reaſon counterpoiſes reaſon, and ſome preponderating principle is neceſſary to move the balance; this principle is the word of God; in revelation we have divine authority for the divine attributes, and whatever appears to contradict them muſt be ſome means, unintelligible to our weak capacities, of promoting the wiſe purpoſes of Providence.

But the diſputes of philoſophers and the controverſies of divines, evince that the greateſt exertions of human intellect have been unequal to the taſk of forming a theological ſyſtem agreeable to any proportion of the learned; much leſs then can we imagine that the unthinking, unenlightened part of mankind, ſhould be convinced by reaſonings totally unintelligible

to

to themſelves, and by no means ſatisfactory to ſuperior capacities. As well might we expect to give motion to a new planetary ſyſtem, by the efforts of mechanical ſkill, as to eſtabliſh an univerſally binding rule of belief by the deductions of unaſſiſted reaſon; deficient in clearneſs, in authority, and univerſality, they are totally inadequate to prove the divine nature and attributes, or diſcover and enforce the duties which we owe to an infinite and all-perfect Creator.

From the ſubtilty and abſtruſeneſs of the argument *à priori* it follows, that the bulk of mankind muſt require ſome more intelligible ground of belief. The only other ground excluſive of revelation is the demonſtration *à poſteriori*—now with reſpect to this demonſtration I would reſt my argument on a ſingle conſideration which I truſt will prove nearly concluſive.

It

It has been already ſhewn that the certainty of a future ſtate, is neceſſary to eſtabliſh the moral attributes—it has been alſo ſhown that the beſt or indeed the only rational proof of a future ſtate takes thoſe attributes for granted; and hence to all appearance, the attributes and a future ſtate depend mutually on each other for ſupport.

If, however, the advocates for human reaſon are of a different opinion, it is their buſineſs either to prove the attributes independently of a future ſtate, or a future ſtate without taking the attributes into conſideration. Now, in order to eſtabliſh the former of theſe proofs, they muſt aſſert a perfect diſtribution of juſtice in this world, in contradiction to experience and reaſon, and to eſtabliſh the latter they muſt have a new ſource of new ideas,—ſince no conſideration of man's nature which is periſhable, nor of the univerſe which is changeable and material, can prove a future ſtate,

ſtate, and the nature of the ſoul and of ſpiritual exiſtence can be arrived at neither by ſenſation nor reflection.

But we have an account of the Deity, ſupported not by abſtruſe reaſoning, but by miracles and the divine word; we have a ſimple, perfect and well ſanctioned rule of duty deduced from the attributes thus proved; and we have every doubt of the divine wiſdom, juſtice, and goodneſs, obviated by the promiſe of a future ſtate: all this we have from revelation, and we have ſeen the Goſpel, the laſt and beſt revelation, notwithſtanding the power of its opponents, and the mean ſituation of its teachers, miraculouſly ſpread through the world, reforming its errors, and advancing its intereſts temporal and eternal. Shall we not, then, urged by the univerſal failure of reaſon and the miraculous efficacy of faith, aſſert the neceſſity of revelation, and ſay with the philoſophic

philoſophic Plato, " as the eye cannot
" contemplate the Sun but by his own
" light, neither can the mind contem-
" plate God, the Sun of the Univerſe,
" without a beam of his own Illumi-
" nation."

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